

Poll: State divided on the prospect of homegrown nuclear energy

By Judy Fahys

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Posted: 12:34 PM- Green River resident Nancy Dunham wouldn't mind having safe, clean nuclear power plants in the neighborhood to energize the local economy.

But Moab resident Sarah Fields doubts reactors will fly because they are water hogs and will bring more waste into an area already riddled with the dangerous stuff.

The two views illustrate Utah's split on the nuclear power plant issue, according to a new opinion poll by The Salt Lake Tribune.

About as many Utahns would welcome having nuclear-power plants in the state as those who would oppose reactors, respondents say.

Forty-three percent favor construction of nuclear plants in their state and 42 percent object.

Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc. of Washington, D.C., conducted the newspaper's telephone poll of 625 likely voters from throughout the state Oct. 29-31. It has a margin of error of about 4 percent.

The findings come just weeks after most Utahns learned about efforts by two legislators, Republican Reps. Aaron Tilton of Springville and Mike Noel of Kanab, to locate two reactors near Green River, Emery County. They would be Utah's first nuclear plants.

If the plans go forward, the Utah reactors would be among nearly two dozen on the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's schedule of license reviews for new plants.

The news has gotten people talking about nuclear energy in Emery County, and Grand County downstream. And everyone seems to agree on one point: People want specifics.

Safety, water use and economic benefits - they are all questions that need answers, says Dunham, a 76-year-old who has lived in the area for more than a half-century, raised six children there and whose family supplied mining equipment during the southeastern Utah uranium boom.

"People need to understand the whole process and what it does to their environment," she says.

"So far as radiation goes, I personally have no problems with it," adds Dunham, who once visited a reactor in Wisconsin. "It's clean power, and it's coming."

A number of Green River residents suspect it may be just another get-jobs-quick idea that collapses before any good can come of it.

"I think it's just a lot of talk," says Duane Riches, 45, who owns the Melon Vine Food Store with his wife, Penney.

"I'm not saying it's good or bad because I don't know much about nuclear power. But I don't see it happening, so I'm not worried about it."

Adds Penney: "I heard a couple of locals say it'll be fine: our grandkids will just glow in the dark."

Rafting outfitter Bob Quist agreed that too many fly-by-night proposals have roused this community of 900, then dashed its high hopes for economic vitality.

"What I would call it is a lot of hype," says the longtime Green River resident. "Just another - what can you say? - boondoggle."

He recalls the community uproar over a nuclear plant more than two decades ago that evaporated after millions of dollars and lots of local goodwill had been spent on it. Quist says he would probably fight it again - because of the impact on the community's resources - even though he's not opposed to nuclear energy.

Behind the desk of the Green River golf course, former Mayor Glen Dale Johnson says he would like to see a nuclear plant come to the community and bring a bigger payroll. With the city's annual budget of about \$1 million, and lacking a property tax, leaders need new resources to fund improvements and services.

"We've been promised a lot," he says, noting that proposals for a refinery and other businesses have failed in the past. "And maybe this time we can make it happen."

Meanwhile, Green River resident Barbara King is against it. A member of the Sierra Club, she says reactors will mar the scenic beauty so crucial to the local economy that caters to people visiting the San Rafael Swell, Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park.

"It's my neighborhood," she says. "It's a beautiful area, and [a reactor] would be an eyesore."

A newly formed environmental group based in Moab, Uranium Watch, has begun to put the proposed reactors in its crosshairs. Members are drafting an opposition letter to Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. and state legislators, said Fields, a Moab resident who is organizing the group.

"This is not going to fly," she says.

Moab is the scene of a U.S. Energy Department cleanup of uranium tailings that is projected to cost as much as \$835 million and last for two decades.

And it is upstream of a uranium processing plant that some have accused of "sham disposal" of radiation-contaminated waste.

Uranium Watch is concerned about the proposed reactors' water use, on-site waste storage, endangered species in the Colorado River, electric transmission lines and other issues that will come up as the public considers the proposal.

"Here we are trying to get rid of nuclear waste and they [the reactor proponents] want to come in," says Uranium Watch member John Weisheit.

Grand County Council member Joette Langianese predicted her community would "respond vocally" to the new reactor proposal.

"It will be a very controversial issue for Grand County," she says, "one way or the other."

fahys@sltrib.com